

Embedded Narratives: The Widow of Ephesus [Discussion]

Read the following two passages:

(i) Niceros' story of the werewolf

[61] After they had all wished each other sound minds and good health, Trimalchio turned to Niceros. "You used to be better company at dinner," he remarked, "and I don't know why you should be dumb today, with never a word to say. If you wish to make me happy, tell about that experience you had, I beg of you." Delighted at the affability of his friend, "I hope I lose all my luck if I'm not tickled to death at the humor I see you in," Niceros replied. "All right, let's go the limit for a good time, though I'm afraid these scholars will laugh at me, but I'll tell my tale and they can go as far as they like. What the hell do I care who laughs? It's better to be laughed at than laughed down." These words spoke the hero, and began the following tale: "We lived in a narrow street in the house Gavilla now owns, when I was a slave. There, by the will of the gods, I fell in love with the wife of Terentius, the innkeeper; you knew Melissa of Tarentum, that pretty round-checked little wench. It was no carnal passion, so hear me, Hercules, it wasn't; I was not in love with her physical charms. No, it was because she was such a good sport...I trusted her with everything I had and never was done out of anything. Her husband up and died on the place, one day, so I tried every way I could to get to her, for you know friends ought to show up when anyone's in a pinch.

[62] It so happened that our master had gone to Capua to attend to some odds and ends of business and I seized the opportunity, and persuaded a guest of the house to accompany me as far as the fifth mile-stone. He was a soldier, and as brave as the very devil. We set out about cock-crow, the moon was shining as bright as midday, and came to where the tombstones are. My man stepped aside amongst them, but I sat down, singing, and commenced to count them up. When I looked around for my companion, he had stripped himself and piled his clothes by the side of the road. My heart was in my mouth, and I sat there while he pissed a ring around them and was suddenly turned into a wolf! Now don't think I'm joking, I wouldn't lie for any amount of money, but as I was saying, he commenced to howl after he was turned into a wolf, and ran away into the forest. I didn't know where I was for a minute or two, then I went to his clothes, to pick them up, and damned if they hadn't turned to stone! Was ever anyone nearer dead from fright than me? Then I whipped out my sword and cut every shadow along the road to bits, till I came to the house of my mistress. I looked like a ghost when I went in, and I nearly slipped my wind. The sweat was pouring down my crotch, my eyes were staring, and I could hardly be brought around. My Melissa wondered why I was out so late. "Oh, if you'd only come sooner," she said, "you could have helped us: a wolf broke into the folds and attacked the sheep, bleeding them like a butcher. But he didn't get the laugh on me, even if he did get away, for one of the slaves ran his neck through with a spear!" I couldn't keep my eyes shut any longer when I heard that, and as soon as it grew light, I rushed back to our Gaius' house like an innkeeper beaten out of his bill, and when I came to the place where the clothes had been turned into stone, there was nothing but a pool of blood! And moreover, when I got home, my soldier was lying in bed, like an ox, and a doctor was dressing his neck! I knew then that he was a werewolf, and after that, I couldn't have eaten a crumb of bread with him, no, not if you had

killed me. Others can think what they please about this, but as for me, I hope your geniuses will all get after me if I lie.”

[63] We were all dumb with astonishment, when “I take your story for granted,” said Trimalchio, “and if you’ll believe me, my hair stood on end, and all the more, because I know that Niceros never talks nonsense: he’s always level-headed, not a bit gossipy...”

(ii) Eumolpus’ story of the Widow of Ephesus

[110] And so Eumolpos, who was both our advocate in our time of need and the author of our present amity, in order that the jovial mood might not fall silent through a lack of conversation, began to bring up a number of charges against the fickleness of women: how easily their affections were inspired; how quickly they forgot even their children; that there was no woman so chaste that she could not be distracted to the point of madness with lust for some stranger. Nor was his concern with time-worn tragedies or famous personages whose names were familiar to the ages, but rather with an event that had occurred within living memory — which, he said, he would set out for us, if we wished to hear it. And so, with the eyes and ears of everyone having been drawn in his direction, he began his tale as follows:

[111] **“A certain matron of Ephesus was so renowned for her chastity that she attracted even the women of the neighboring communities to come gaze upon her.** And thus, when she had borne her husband to his grave, not content to attend the funeral procession with disheveled locks, in the common manner, or to beat her bared bosom before the view of the crowd, she even followed the dead man into the tomb and, after the corpse had been placed in an underground crypt, in the Greek fashion, began to stand guard over it and to weep over it, night and day. While she was in the midst of tormenting herself in this way and seeking death by starvation, her parents could not draw her away, nor could her other relatives; in the end, even the town magistrates were driven away and so departed, and the matron — bewailed by all as an unparalleled exemplar of womanhood — was now passing her fifth day without nourishment. By the wretched woman’s side sat a most loyal slave-woman, who at one and the same time both lent her tears to the widow, as the latter mourned, and renewed the lamp that had been placed in the tomb whenever its light had failed. And thus in the whole city-state there was a single topic of conversation: people of all ranks were proclaiming that that woman alone had shone forth as a true model of chaste love, when in the meantime the governor of the province ordered robbers to be fixed to crosses in the vicinity of that little dwelling in which the matron was bewailing the newly dead body. Thus, on the following night, when the soldier who was guarding the crosses to ensure that no one might drag a corpse off for burial had remarked upon a light shining quite brightly amid the tombs and had heard the groaning of the woman as she mourned, he desired, through a common failing of the human race, to know who was doing this and what exactly they were up to. And so he went down into the tomb and, upon seeing a most beautiful woman, stopped short at first, frightened as if by some kind of portent or an apparition from the netherworld. Then, when he had caught sight of the corpse of the dead man lying in state and had contemplated the woman’s tears and her face gouged by her nails, judging the situation to be what in fact it was — that the woman was not able to endure her longing for her dead husband — he brought his bit of supper into the tomb and began to urge the grieving woman not to persist in a sorrow that was utterly superfluous and not to

rend her breast with sobbing that was destined to be of no use: ‘The same end awaited everyone, and the same abode,’ he said — and the other things by means of which wounded minds are summoned back to healthy thinking. But the matron, stunned by the stranger’s attempt to console her, tore at her bosom all the more violently and, tearing her hair, placed the tresses on the corpse of her dead husband.

All the same, the soldier did not retreat but, employing the same encouragement, attempted to give the wretched woman some nourishment — until at length the slave-woman, seduced by the odor of the wine, first herself extended her conquered hand to the soldier’s kind invitation, and then, once she had been restored by drink and food, began to attack her mistress’ stubbornness and said, ‘What good will this do you, if you will have been undone by starvation? — if you will have buried yourself alive? — if you will have poured forth your life’s breath when you have not yet been condemned to die, before the fates demand it? Do you believe that ashes or the buried spirits of the dead perceive it?’ (cf. Virg. *Aen.* 4.34) Are you willing to return to life? Are you willing to shake off this womanly error and enjoy the pleasures of this world, for so long as it is permitted to you? The corpse of your dead husband itself ought to urge you to live.’ No one listens against their will when urged either to take food or to live, and so the woman, drained by her abstinence of many days, allowed her willfulness to be shattered, nor did she fill herself less eagerly with food than the slave-woman who had been conquered previously. [112] For the rest, you know which temptation generally assails a man on a full stomach. Employing the same inducements by which he had gotten the matron to wish to live, the soldier also attacked her chastity. Nor did the young man seem unattractive or lacking in eloquence to the chaste matron, particularly with the slave-woman urging a display of gratitude and repeatedly saying:

‘Will you even fight against a pleasing love?
[Nor does it occur to you in whose territory you have settled?]’
(cf. Virg. *Aen.* 4.38-39)

Why am I delaying longer? The woman did not abstain in this regard either, and the soldier, victorious, won her over on both counts. And so the two lay together not only on that night on which they celebrated their nuptials, but even on the next day and on the third, with the folding doors of the tomb shut fast, to be sure, so that if anyone of the matron’s acquaintances or any stranger should have approached the tomb, they would think that the most chaste wife had breathed her last over the corpse of her husband. For the rest, the soldier, delighting in both the beauty of the woman and in the hidden nature of their affair, kept purchasing whatever nice thing he could, according to his means, and right away, at the fall of night, would bring it to the tomb. And so it was that the relatives of one of the crucified men, when they had seen that the watch had been relaxed, drew down at night the man who was hanging there and gave him over to his final obsequies. But the soldier, having been gotten the better of while he was slacking off, when on the next day he sees one of the crosses lacking a corpse, fears his punishment and tells the woman what had happened: nor was he going to await the judge’s sentence, but with his sword would pass judgment on his own idleness. So she had better get ready a place for a dying man, and make one gloomy vault for both her husband and her lover. The woman’s heart was tender as well as pure. ‘May the gods not allow,’ she said, ‘that I should at the same time look upon the deaths of the two men dearest to me. I prefer to sacrifice the dead man rather than to kill the one who is alive.’ In accordance with this pronouncement she orders the corpse of her husband to be lifted out of its coffin and affixed to that cross which was empty. The soldier made use of the ingenious scheme of that most judicious woman, and the next day all the townspeople

marveled at how the dead man had gone onto the cross.”

[113] The sailors received the tale with laughter, while Tryphaena blushed not a little and lovingly placed her face on Giton’s neck. But Lichas did not laugh: instead, shaking his head angrily he said, “If the governor had been just, he ought to have transferred the corpse of the worthy man back into the tomb and fixed the woman to the cross.” No doubt Hedyle had reentered his thoughts, and his ship that was plundered in the course of our adulterous exodus. But the terms of our treaty did not permit him to call to mind past wrongs, nor did the jovial mood that had filled our thoughts give a place for anger.

Now make an attempt at answering these questions:

1. Can you summarise in a short paragraph – even better, a sentence or two – the plot of these two stories?
2. What is interesting about Niceros’ story of the werewolf?
3. What is interesting about Eumolpus story of the Widow of Ephesus?
4. Does Niceros succeed in making his story convincing? If so, how? If not, why not?
5. What might be the point or purpose of Eumolpus’s story?
6. Are there any similarities between these two stories (in terms of their narrative technique or the way in which they are introduced into the text)?
7. What genre/type of storytelling does the story of the Widow of Ephesus belong?
8. What does the story of the Widow of Ephesus satirise/parody? Identify specific passages to support your answer.
9. What does the story of the Widow of Ephesus tell us about the nature of the *Satyricon*?

Useful reading

- T. Whitmarsh (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Greek and Roman Novel* – chapter on ‘Intertextuality’ by J. Morgan and S. J. Harrison
- E. Buckley and M. Dinter (eds.), *A Companion to the Neronian Age*, pp.252-6 (in a chapter by T. Murgatroyd)
- K. Freudenburg (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Roman Satire* – chapter on ‘The satiric maze’ by V. Rimell, esp. pp.161-8

